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November 30, 2011

Foundation Helps Native American Students Overcome Education Challenges

By **ICTMN Staff** November 30, 2011



American Indian Education Foundation

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Among **Native American students**, only 46 percent graduate high school and a mere 17 percent go on to attend college.

*The **American Indian Education Foundation** has made it their mission to help Native American students realize that they can overcome these daunting statistics and the many academic challenges they face.*

*AIEF spokesperson Helen Oliff shares the inside information about how the organization inspires hope in Native American students and facilitates success in this exclusive **TeachHUB interview**, reprinted with permissions here.*

What unique challenges do Native American students face?

Our years of working with students in Indian country have given us insight into some of the barriers to **education**.

One major challenge for American Indian students is believing that postsecondary education is beyond their reach. Yet, some of the factors that discourage these students from furthering their education are quite simple. Some examples include: not knowing how to search for a college that suits them, handling college application and financial aid processes that are unfamiliar and intimidating, and being unable to access adequate career advisement from school counselors because reservation schools are consistently in the lowest 10 percent of DOE [Department of Education] funding and counselors are overburdened.

Another challenge is that American Indian students are often the first in their families to consider college. There is a need for additional role models. Seeing nurses, **teachers**, lawyers, and accountants who are supporting positive change for their tribes, either on the reservations or in urban communities, makes it clear to students that achieving a college degree makes a difference. Seeing role models first-hand helps break the spell of disbelief that college is not an option and motivates more American Indian youth to attend college.

A lack of encouragement and interpersonal support (emotional or financial) can cause a Native student not to pursue college or to drop out. The need for parental support or support of a primary caregiver or community member is crucial. This is true for American Indian students and other students throughout the U.S.

Encouraging and expecting American Indian students to start and complete college pays off too. Students will rise to the level expected of them. It is why we ask students who apply for AIEF scholarships what support they have in their lives. You can hear our recorded discussion on this in our press room; the clip is named "**Support, the Key to Student Success.**"

How does the AIEF actively support Native American students?

The American Indian Education Foundation (AIEF), a program of **National Relief Charities** (NRC), makes it a point to provide American Indian students with adequate information about their options for a different future and to help them believe these options apply to them. Among other things, we ask past **scholarship** recipients to conduct workshops in their home communities, which helps younger students believe they can receive funding through AIEF and attend college. This approach of one Native student talking to another has been successful in informing more students and

encouraging them to push through the barriers such as scholarship applications and financial paperwork.

Each year, AIEF awards over 200 postsecondary scholarships to American Indian students. We believe that selecting the right students is a key to retention and graduation. We look for middle-of-the-road academic performers who are highly motivated and possess a history of overcoming obstacles. Over 95 percent of the students we select for scholarships complete the college year. The norm for academic year completion among first-year Native students is about 21 percent.

AIEF also works with partner colleges to help Native students stay in school until they graduate. We offer:

- High-school-to-college transitional programs, which orient first-year Native students who often have only lived on reservations or in remote communities, and give them an experience of the campus, financial aid, dorms, and the student support center before classes start.
- Matching grant challenges, which motivate partner colleges to raise more of their own funds earmarked for American Indian students.
- Funding for tools required in nursing and other health studies, which avoids fees that are often unexpected and unaffordable for Native students.
- Emergency funding, which partner colleges can distribute to Native students for unexpected emergencies such as memorials at home or health issues. AIEF emergency funding reduces college dropout that arises from Native students leaving campus mid-semester for family reasons and lacking the funding to return to school.

How was AIEF formed?

In Bureau of Indian Education schools, the high school graduation rate for all students is 46 percent compared to a national average of 89 percent. Of those Native students who graduate high school, only 17 percent begin college, compared to a national average of 62 percent. Of this 17 percent, only 4 percent make it through the financial, emotional, and academic challenges of the first year of college. Ultimately, 11 percent of Native people in the U.S. have a college degree, less than half the norm for the rest of the country.

The low matriculation rate of American Indian students into college is a national crisis that largely stems from poverty and low access to information. This situation helps sustain poverty on the reservations. NRC realized the importance of education and began with the practice of awarding undergraduate scholarships to students attending any type of accredited post-secondary educational institution.

AIEF now administers both undergraduate and graduate scholarships. AIEF further developed four additional educational initiatives promoting retention of students and empowerment of schools with high indigenous student populations. All of our services were formed with the underlying intention and strategy of increasing access and retention so that more American Indian students are equipped to help create long-term, sustainable solutions for their communities.

How do you determine grant and scholarship recipients?

AIEF has been selecting students to receive our scholarship since 1996. Our applicants undergo a competitive scholarship process that provides \$2,000 in monetary assistance for the academic year.

AIEF aims to reach students from relatively remote areas, rather than those who are most likely to receive scholarships and are familiar with the financial aid system. AIEF gives priority to students from reservation schools which, due to their isolation, often require personal visits, multiple mailings and follow-up phone calls to generate applicants. We target students from all 50 states including Alaska and Hawaii, and American Indian students of all ages who are tribally enrolled and attending full time technical schools, community colleges, colleges or universities throughout the United States. Our scholarship encourages American Indian students to complete their postsecondary education through a certificate program, vocational-technical degree, associate's degree, bachelor's degree or graduate degree. These elements are built into our selection process and different than many Native-focused scholarships.

An AIEF scholarship is also different from other scholarships in that it is designed for students who do not have the highest test scores or GPAs. Rather, we fund applicants whom we consider "the best bet" student who will stick with it to graduation. Emotional intelligence also plays an important role in determining scholarship recipients. By this we mean the emotional intelligence of the applicants as well as the selection committee members.

Can you share a stand-out success story from your programs?

On the reservations, the high school dropout rate ranges from 30 percent to 70 percent. About 34 percent of all adults without a high school diploma or GED live in households below the poverty level. Alton Little Soldier Belt is one of our GED success students.

Alton spent his childhood on the **Pine Ridge Reservation**. His family was often homeless so he attended boarding school on the reservation. As a child, Alton aspired to be a professional cyclist or long distance runner like Billy Mills. When Alton was 16, his mother died. Years of hardship and loss of hope lead him to drop out of high school.

Many years later, Alton discovered through family research that he was a direct descendant of the son of Sitting Bull, a holy man and chief to the Oglala Sioux people. Discovering this connection was a turning point for Alton, who decided to change his life so he could contribute more to his tribe. Getting a GED was the first step. Alton battled a third grade reading level and learning disabilities to finally attain his GED at age 45. He was committed to going to college and started to search for scholarships to help him realize his dreams. It was through AIEF that Alton was awarded scholarships for his first two years of college.

Today, he works as a counselor trainee in South Dakota and helps Native people overcome **addiction** to set their lives on a positive path. Alton is grateful for the opportunity to give back to his people and to be finishing his AA degree.

The Transition Camps Grant Program seems pretty unique to your organization. Can you tell me more about that and why it is important to the success of students?

AIEF's Transition Camp service is fairly unique in that it targets first-year American Indian students who face a steep transition from reservation-to-campus life, a transition that is a major contributor to why only 1 in 5 American Indian students complete their college year. The service was specifically designed to ease the transition for Native students who have only lived on a reservation or in an isolated community.

Like all students, Native freshmen must adjust to campus life, the difference between high school and college classrooms, and being away from their families. Yet unlike other students, many Native students must also adjust to life off of the reservation. This is a huge transition that encompasses cultural, spiritual, nutritional, economic, and lifestyle shifts that far exceed what non-Native students face. Native students also sometimes face the social pressures of **prejudice**.

During the transition camps, students form relationships with other Native students. They also learn their way around campus, get introduced to the financial aid office, bookstore, and student support center, move into their dorms, and eat in the dining hall. Doing this before the campus is crowded and before they have the pressures of new classes gives them a leg up on the steep adjustment they have to make and helps support that ever critical first-year retention.

Does the AIEF do any outreach to help Native Americans continue their cultural education? Why or why not?

AIEF is not involved with cultural education, as each tribe's culture is unique. In addition, we believe it is each individual's decision as to what they want to participate in within their own culture.

We do believe in supporting colleges and post-secondary institution student centers, whether Native American or multicultural.

There seems to be a growing debate surrounding Native American youths attending reservations schools and Native American youths attending off-reservation public or boarding schools. Do you have a stance in this debate?

AIEF does not have a stance on this. We realize this is an individual and family choice for reasons that are important to them. It's very different from the old days where boarding school was not negotiable for American Indian students and their families.

What drives students to attend schools off the reservation?

Some rural and remote areas, Havasupai and Alaska for example, do not have a high school and it's a positive for students to attend a boarding school to continue their education.

The choice to attend off-reservation schools is sometimes based on what a student wants to study, their interests, or what best supports their vocational choice. Sometimes it's a "best fit" decision, but it's always up to the individual.

Do the AIEF outreach programs extend to students who attend school off the reservation? Why or why not?

For grades K-12, AIEF provides school supplies to reservation schools to equip students with the tools to learn and to support retention.

For post-secondary education, we support schools on and off the reservation with a high proportion of Native students. We are serving reservation students, urban Indians, and any American Indian student pursuing a college education regardless of where they live within the 50 states.

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Tuesday, December 6, 2011

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